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UM news

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IMMEDIATELY

FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS SAY
GOODBYE TO UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

millar/jg
6/8/79
dailies w/pix

by
Janet C. Miller
UM Information Services

MISSOULA--

In June, two foreign language teaching assistants (T.A.'s), Genevieve Coutant and Theodora Niss, said good-bye in their native languages of French and German (au revoir and auf Weidersehen) to the University of Montana and Montanans they have known.

The T.A.'s taught in the French and German sections of UM's Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures on exchange programs between UM and Austria and France during the 1978-79 UM school year.

Coutant teaches four classes a week in conversational French and Niss, five classes a week in German grammar and literature.

Coutant first heard about UM as a student at the University of Grenoble, France, where she met Billings native, Kathy Manhke, a T.A. exchange student from UM, who was teaching English at a teachers' training college in the Grenoble area. Manhke entertained Coutant and her French colleagues with stories of a mountain college set in the heart of the Montana Rockies.

Manhke described a friendly, independent people living near the last of the world's wilderness areas, land looking much as it did to the first French fur trappers heading west over the Great Divide.

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The French T. A. was so impressed with Manhke's enthusiasm about her native state that she applied for a teaching position in Montana. When she was asked to give the names of two alternate places where she might accept a teaching job in the United States, Coutant unhesitatingly wrote first, second and third choices, University of Montana, Missoula, Montana, knowing if she wasn't selected to come to UM she might not be able to come to the United States at all.

The Austrian T. A. Theodora Niss was given only a week to decide whether to take a T. A.'s slot at UM arranged through the Austrian ministry of education. The Rocky Mountain setting seemed to resemble her native Austria more than Minnesota where she had been previously offered a job. In September of '78 Niss arrived in Missoula to teach Montanans how to speak German.

Niss had been a teacher of art, sports and English for the past four years at a hauptchule or junior high school in the city of Molln, Austria, an area known for its ski-boot manufacturing.

From the hauptchule, at age 16, Austrian youngsters go on to high school or may drop out and go to work while university-bound students attend a gymnasium or high school to prepare for higher education.

Austrian teachers work about the same number of hours per day as American teachers, but their salaries range from \$400 to \$900 per month depending on the grade level at which they teach. The school week runs Monday through Saturday, however.

"The language taught in Austrian schools is high German," Niss says, "and is the media language in radio and television."

"Austrians," Niss adds, "speak a German dialect that Germans can't understand."

There are also some differences between French and American schools. French T.A. Coutant notes that the blue-jeaned UM faculty members have an easy camaraderie with their students, not possible in France where instructors have little contact with their students outside of classes.

The supermarket approach to selecting courses in which American students make up their own schedules each quarter intrigues the young French teacher. In France, courses in each major are set, are a year long and grades are assigned primarily from one long test in June.

Students who fail the final test have one chance to take it again in September or repeat the whole year's course in the failed subject. However, for qualified students, in France university education is free.

High school teachers in France must write competitive examinations in order to qualify for certification. As in the United States, the French teaching profession is suffering from an abundance of supply and a lowered demand for teachers. As a result, in France prospective candidates are weeded out by selecting somewhat less than 10% of the education majors who write the examinations for teaching diplomas.

The top teachers are assured of jobs and receive \$600 a month for the three years practical training in schools required after university graduation.

French high school teachers earn \$800-\$900 a month depending on the grade level at which they teach and their qualifications. Coutant notes that most secondary teachers in France hold a master's degree in their teaching areas and sign five to ten-year contracts with the state.

By September, Coutant, who holds a master's degree in English from the University of Grenoble, France, will be back in her native country for her first year of teaching English in a lycee or high school in Grenoble.

Niss has also discovered some differences in the free and easy Montana life style compared to the older more conservative Austrian culture.

In Austria, the butcher, the baker, the candlestick maker concept of shopping persists in which housewives still depend on small specialty shops for daily buying.

While supermarkets are not unknown in that country, Austrian shoppers, Niss observes, prefer smaller shops to the neon-lit American style markets where you can buy a pair of shoes or a pound of butter under the same roof.

The first time Niss watched American television, she wondered where the audience sat that laughed on cue in situation comedies.

Canned laugh tracks are not used in Austrian television where the networks are all government owned and broadcast only in the late afternoon and evening. Commercials are allowed for about three minutes between the world news and the evening sports.

"Austrians," she explains, "turn on the television set only when they want to watch something."

The American custom of running the vacuum cleaner, doing high school algebra homework and visiting friends against a background of Hollywood Squares or Mork and Mindy seems a curious custom to the Austrian T.A.

Niss finds the fast-paced American social life oriented around the automobile a contrast to the cafes of her homeland where young people meet to sip coffee and hot chocolate, eat pastries and visit with friends.

Niss plans to stay in the United States for at least another year. She has applied for a T.A.'s position in Santa Barbara, California, teaching German and studying for a job as a translator.

Wherever her travels take the young teacher, however, her native land calls her back.

"Austria will always be my homeland," Niss concludes.

Years from now Niss and Coutant will be able to tell their students in Austria and France, "One time I taught school in a place called Montana where everybody wore cowboy boots and drove a truck with a dog in the back."

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